Spatial Assumptions and Consultative Governance

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Increasing numbers of local and regional environmental management decisions are being made by consultative processes which include local interest groups, experts, industry representatives and government agency representatives. This inclusionary approach to consultative governance is often impeded by a poor understanding of participants' theoretical origins of thought, and a lack of shared assumptions and contextual nuances among participants, all of which impact on the success of consultative processes.

Space, its assumptions and conceptualizations are a central philosophical concept, understood by everyone in their own way. However, space, and the control of space, is inherently political, changing in meaning and application in each context. Space is a function, part of a larger definition of place and scale, and space is a construct, a method of understanding place and orientation. Space, and the control of space, is inherently political. Spaces of human residence, spaces of resources and those of nature, spaces of commerce and those of ownership, spaces of culture and identity, all involve politics.

The application of spatial concepts and the language of its use define the impact of spatial assumptions on the creation of the systems of governance, decision making and policy creation. Without a common point of understanding, achieving transparency of process and implementation is essentially impossible. To improve effectiveness of regional, trans-boundary, trans-disciplinary, and trans-jurisdictional management decision making processes, a greater understanding of core concepts needs to be actively undertaken.

Planning, resource management, environmental protection, enforcement and governance are all politically driven processes which overlap and intersect in their spheres of influence and across the social and ecological systems each attempts to control, protect, regulate or conserve. Each process and sphere of influence uses a lexicon of terms and rhetorics aimed at the internal participants and at external stakeholders (Luks, 1998). The common language of the disciplines which inform and provide the foundation for governance and planning is English, and due to this shared language of discussion, it is tempting to assume that the use of words in common between disciplines requires no examination. The cultures of planning, ecology and economics are as similar as those found in countries of the Commonwealth. The language of government and policy in these 'nations' is English, but subtle differences in the use of colloquial language between individuals in these 'countries' can lead to misunderstandings of the speaker's intent. Word use, and the implications of meaning, is of greatest influence in affecting which questions are asked, the way questions are asked, how observations are made and interpreted, and the way in which these interpretations are used to continue the cultural story.

Space, time and sustainability are a few of the key words and significant concepts which appear to be identical in many disciplines (eg. planning, ecology and economics). When these disciplines are mingled, as is attempted when policy is created through the practices of governance and decision making, it is tempting to use apparently common terminology to discuss problems and proposals without questioning whether the use of a word and its conceptual foundations are created upon shared assumptions and meanings. This becomes problematic when a group of experts and academics, trained in a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds, are brought together to discuss and evaluate policy proposals, or to inform a decision making process.

When the creation of a common theoretical framework is undertaken, it appears to be assumed that the use of common terminology results in the development of equivalent implications for theoretical discussion, and the implications of assumed meaning on the development of apparently equivalent theories. Although interdisciplinary considerations of theory or practice are not new, cross disciplinary discussions are becoming of greater importance in policy creation and decision making processes. Disciplinary isolation, although still a goal in some disciplines, is an idea which ignores the application of developments in knowledge, and the necessity to consider conditions of influence within systems which exist on the theoretical level beyond the borders of traditional isolated disciplinary thought. Whether the practices of consultative governance become fully institutionalized or merely remain as alternative methods for community involvement, integration and mutual understanding among all participants will be at the core if these practices are to succeed in their aim of representation and implementable, locally relevant decision making. As Clarke and Stewart (1989) suggest, the prominence of community governance "requires us to develop a capacity for integration, through shared understanding of issues, problems and opportunities; and through

that, an enhanced capacity for joint action." Without a common point of understanding, achieving transparency of process and implementation is essentially impossible.

A consideration of the implications spatial assumptions, understandings and contexts among the disciplines which form the governance and planning structures of our society is necessary to begin to address the problems created by discipline based fragmented processes of decision making, planning and governance. With the goal of promoting the development of interdisciplinary processes and understanding between divergent philosophical foundations of theory and practice, while encouraging "the integration of their thinking into a trans-discipline aimed at developing a sustainable world" (ISEE Webpage), it is important to begin with the understanding that academic disciplines are distinct cultures of thought. Each discipline has its own set of origins, developed systems of belief, and of practice. In the same way that language is central to the construct and understanding of culture, it is central to academic disciplines, and each with its own core beliefs, assumptions and language. Language informs and provides the framework of the beliefs systems, context, daily practices, traditions, and interpretation of events in every culture. Without an examination of the language, the underlying beliefs and practices, a group cannot be fully understood.

The spaces of resource management and environmental protection, and the scales at which decisions are made, can vary greatly depending on the goal of the process. Spaces of management and protection overlap and impact on each other continuously, as cultural priorities and public policy change. To illustrate, when considering a coastal watershed, and the aquatic systems which comprise it, several nested considerations are involved. If land use planning with the intent of protecting shoreline ecosystems were to occur in a coastal area, the following questions would need to be answered: Is a shoreline plan enough to protect near shore fishing, or should the plan include the estuary which supports and feeds it? Is a conservation plan more effective if the river is included with the estuary and shoreline? What if the river management strategy does not relieve environmental problems of pollution, food species decline, and community recreation use restrictions? Does the answer come from a watershed plan, or do the land uses and historical practices of communities and industry need to be included? Should the need to protect food species and human recreation require a full hydrological region to be managed? Is there really a difference in management and conservation initiatives in the uppermost elevations of a watershed, in the soils and groundwater reserves through which the available water moves, or in the shoreline systems and community uses of water from a managed watershed?

There are no clear answers, and the scale of questioning and the significance of interrelated impacts within the watershed and the shoreline areas are not readily separated. In increasing numbers of circumstances, "resource and environmental management issues, such as depletion of forest and fishery resources and air and water pollution, have come to be seen as both cause and consequence of other major economic and social problems" (Dorcey, 2004). It is no longer possible to separate resource management issues from the social issues of everyday life, making the significance of environmental and resource protection issues economically and socially immediate. The increasing personal relevance of resource decision making processes "has led to resource and environmental management issues being viewed as integral components of almost every area of policy" (Dorcey, 2004). Yet, despite the increasing immediacy of these issues, the answers given for responsible protection and management differ depending upon the training, experience, employment origin, investment pattern and convictions of the person answering the questions. If it is the 'democratic' practice of governance processes, and of stakeholder consultations which are intended to respond to the problem of determining the scale and intensity of management, there is a need for a shared conceptual basis, or at the very least a sharing of context specific assumptions and lexicons. This includes the core concepts of time and space, which are unexamined assumptions embedded in each individual's intellectual training and systems analysis approach.

References

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